

2012

# Ethnography on the Pottery Place

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## Recommended Citation

Reilly, Ciara, "Ethnography on the Pottery Place" (2012). *A with Honors Projects*. 63.  
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/63>

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## **Ethnography on the Pottery Place**

By Ciara Reilly

During my time spent at the Pottery Place, I encounter a wide variety of people – people of all ages and sociocultural backgrounds. Some of the most interesting and diverse people I meet make up a group ranging in age from 60-75 years old. This particular group of people embodies a culture and style of beliefs that I am not completely familiar with. The main foci in their conversations tend to be linked to their connection to their family, the better times they may have had growing up and their past connections to art. For this project, I will carry out an ethnographic observation about this group of elderly people at the Pottery Place and look at the idea of nostalgia, and how the ideas and experiences they have had affect them on a day-to-day basis.

I have been working at the Pottery Place for three years now, and this semester I have been working mostly daytime shifts, from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., when many people are at work and children are attending school. Children and parents are our main clientele for this paint-your-own-pottery studio, where we offer a large selection of pottery for customers to paint, which we then glaze and fire in our kiln. This activity is very popular for birthday parties and gifts for grandparents, which explains why the daytime slot is never very busy. The surrounding businesses: Curves, a fitness center aimed at women; Confidentially Yours, a shop which provides specialty bras and lingerie for women; and Classic Home Consignment, an antique

shop, provide the reason why the majority of the people I see at the Pottery Place between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. are women around the age of 60. Many of these women are just stopping in to see what the shop has to offer; they rarely purchase anything, not seeming to have the time or the patience to take on a painting project and wait the designated four days for the piece to be fired in our kiln and ready for pick-up. But their visits are not too rushed either; each visitor always has enough time to share a story about her experience with art or her daughter's newest occupation.

These elderly women often take a liking to the captive audience, the eighteen-year-old in the red apron; patiently listening, sympathizing and allowing them to talk. The lack of activity within my daytime shift creates the perfect atmosphere for these women to tell-all, and the fact that I have to be at work for that entire time makes me more open to listen to their stories. I often find that I enquire and keep the conversation going. I am an empathetic person and I usually take the time to listen and sympathize with people. I'm often told that my laugh reminds people of someone, triggers a particular memory of a granddaughter or friend. The familiarity that my presence brings can make the person visiting more willing to share their story.

The transition that is made from speaking of the present to the past is especially seen as the women discover what the shop has to offer. This group of people specifically reflects on "better times" they had maybe while in their younger years, maybe spent painting or doing art work. It is very popular for these patrons to come in and admire the bisque, or clay that has been fired in a kiln once already and is sturdy and ready to be painted. This group of people often compares the bisque to greenware, or clay that has been shaped and molded, but not yet fired. Greenware seemingly was popular 20 to 30 years ago. Because it has not been through a kiln, the greenware is much more fragile than the bisque pieces. Many people passing by have told me

about an old friend or neighbor of theirs who had a kiln and provided a convenient way to do art, often starting at the greenware stage and requiring a lot of hard work to get to the completed piece. The hard work evidenced in the creation of pottery, or art work, is often comparable to the hard work experienced in one's life.

Greenware requires a bit more effort than bisque, having to dust and wash off the pieces before beginning the painting process. Many customers have shared stories with me about this more difficult process in great detail, explaining that our clientele have it a lot easier without this extra step. This memory of having to work harder at something to get to the final product has stuck with many of them throughout their lives, and is evidenced just by the mention of the art they have made in the past.

A number of the women who come to the Pottery Place as customers are usually in search of small Christmas tree lights to fill older ceramic Christmas trees. Our shop sells models and lights very similar to the pieces described, which were often painted twenty or thirty years prior by a mother or other family member. During the short transaction needed to sell these lights, most women like to tell me the story about when the tree was made, where it has always been kept at their mother's house and the significance of this particular Christmas tree during the holiday season; as well as the lasting importance of the tree to their family.

For these women it is apparent that religion plays a large role in their daily life. The tradition of keeping a tree in their home has been passed down, maybe from their mother or grandmother, over many years. Painting these ceramic pieces at the Pottery Place may just seem like a fun way to pass time, but for these women the piece of art they take away from the experience, even if it was not created at our shop, is of great importance. But of even greater

importance to these women, often made apparent to me by the mention of the church they belong to, is their religion. This sense of belonging is often fulfilled by religion and has been for a very long time. The text *Anthropology: Appreciating Human Diversity* explains that, “anthropologists have stressed the collective, shared and enacted nature of religion, the emotions it generates, and the meanings it embodies” (Kottak 2011: 493). Many of these women may have family far away or have lost loved ones and the security offered by religion is of great comfort to them.

As strange as it may seem for this group of people to have such a strong connection to these pieces of pottery, such as a Christmas tree, it is not usually the pottery they are attached to, but the memory that is associated with the time spent creating the piece. One specific occasion when I saw evidence of this was when another customer had come to the shop to pick up the piece after the four-day period. The process when someone comes to pick up is usually made up of finding the ceramic items on the shelves, taking them down, admiring them, and wrapping the pieces up for the customer to bring home. This grandmother described the plate she was looking for, as customers often do. She explained that it had two footprints on it—handprints and footprints are especially popular when it comes to both documenting stages in a child’s life and making something functional. I found the plate she had described with relative ease and complimented how well she had done with the footprints—it is not always an easy task to get clear footprints with a small child. The grandmother then revealed to me that her daughter and son-in-law had a hard time getting pregnant and shared how special this baby is to their family. Although this woman did not have to experience the inability to conceive personally, she told the story as if she felt the pain just the same as her daughter and her daughter’s husband. A small plate in comparison to this story seems silly, but for the family it may serve as a constant reminder of their achievement of bringing a new human into the world.

The large selection of pottery aimed at children and completed pieces decorating the shelves evoke a particular response from the older age group. It often inspires a story of a grandchild who would love to paint a little ceramic dog because he just got a new puppy over the weekend. It is obvious how much joy telling these stories brings to these women and how badly they wish to share in these small joys with their grandchildren and children on a daily basis. Oftentimes the story is followed by where these family members currently live, maybe somewhere close like Chicago or somewhere further like Colorado, and often the further away the family the more the grandmother has to share about her grandchildren. On one occasion, a grandmother brought her two granddaughters in to paint photo frames as a parting gift. The following morning, the granddaughters were moving to Germany for two years because their father is in the military. The grandmother asked me to take candid photographs of them throughout the hour they were in to commemorate this occasion. Her granddaughters painted photo frames for her to take away from the day and possibly to house some of the photos I took for her. Even with grandchildren and children far away, these small keepsakes act as reminders of happy times spent with these family members, which can be easily drawn on when one is missing one's loved ones.

The grandparents who are fortunate to have grandchildren nearby occasionally come to the Pottery Place for an afternoon to work on an art project together. One particular couple brought their granddaughter in to paint ornaments for their Christmas tree. I spoke with them briefly when they were in painting, but was just getting off work so I was not able to talk to them until they returned four days later to pick up their pottery. As I was going through the pick-up procedure for the customers, I was impressed by the grandfather's plate that he had made; it featured a large ship and a tumultuous sea scene. I complimented the plate and he proceeded to

tell me that he was an artist and he loved to paint different ocean scenes, including lighthouses and ships, and he wished to sell the paintings he did on canvas at an upcoming art fair. I told him that it sounded like a nice opportunity and asked where he got the inspiration for his work – did he have a favorite seaside location to spend time painting? He then told me that he had never actually seen the ocean before, but he and his wife were hoping to visit the sea on their next vacation.

I was struck by his comment about never seeing the ocean and almost wished that I could somehow share all of the seaside experiences I had with this man and his wife. The conversation I had with this man made me aware of the attitude many of these older people have toward missed opportunities. This particular couple had tentative plans to head to the ocean on their next vacation, but these plans could have been in effect for many years, always putting it off to the next year with the hope to one day go and visit. It also may explain why some feelings of nostalgia these older couples experience could put pressure on their children or grandchildren to have these opportunities for them, so that the older generation would live vicariously through these family members.

Just like the grandfather who had never seen the ocean, a woman who phoned the shop told me about an experience that her son was having. Her original question regarding the Pottery Place was simple and could be answered in under a minute—could she still use the gift card that she got last year for this upcoming month? Yes, I told her, they never expire. I thought the conversation would come to an end at that point, but she began telling me that she had lost the gift certificate and happened to find it in a place she never would have guessed – her dresser! We laughed about the strange place for it, and she then told me that she hadn't been in to our shop or called to ask about it because she was so preoccupied with her son and all that was going on in

his life. He was studying to become a veterinarian and would soon be done with school and move on to find a career. Before I knew it, I had been on the phone with her for fifteen minutes, listening intently as she told me of all the challenges he had to overcome to achieve his goal. She was so impassioned and proud to see her son go through all of this to get the career of his choosing and wanting me to share in her joy for him. And it was hard for me not to. As the conversation wore on I started thinking that maybe this woman was so excited for her child because she may have never had this opportunity herself, but now her son would.

By making myself more keenly aware of the older people I see throughout my days at the Pottery Place, I found myself becoming more interested in a number of conversations I had with the people I encountered. I find that this group of elderly people has a desire to spend more time with family and discuss members of their family with others, including myself, an employee at a pottery shop who would never probably encounter any of the people discussed. They also are passionate about the small things in their daily lives. I imagine that most of this passion stems from the feeling of nostalgia felt by many in this age group. In William Cunningham Bissell's ethnography, *Engaging Colonial Nostalgia*, he defines nostalgia as an "awareness of fragmentation, a sense of loss of cohesion, certainty, and wholeness ... Nostalgia, after all, involves the longing for something that cannot be restored, something dead and gone. It precisely marks the distance between 'then' and 'now'" (2005: 225). This distance can often be bridged by something as frivolous as pottery, a reminder of something that used to be an important part of someone's life at one time.

Based on the many conversations I have had, and continue to have daily with older people at the Pottery Place, I have gathered an understanding of the struggles this group experiences on a regular basis. Although many of these people may seem as if they lead an easy,



carefree lifestyle in retirement, I came to the understanding that this lifestyle can also be extremely stressful. As these women grow older they may lose family members, either to death, or lack of mobility on their own part; their children wanting to travel and live outside of what they know to be familiar. Although their family may be far, they still rely on these familiar faces for a link to shared stories and memories. Another link to experiences they have had comes in the form of pottery, or art. The symbolism that exists within a small piece of pottery and the stories that can be told about it are important to a lot of people that visit the Pottery Place, but more so to these women in particular. For many of these women, their view on art and how it has developed and changed, even with the simple example of greenware and bisqueware is important and is mirrored in life. To them, having to work harder for something is a thing of the past, something that is “dead and gone” and, as in Cunningham’s definition, just another reminder of nostalgia.

## **Afterword**

Conducting this ethnography for an anthropology course as an Honor's Project really opened my eyes to things that I was unaware of before. Namely the large amount I can gather about people from having brief conversations, or merely observing them. In combining their stories, I was made aware of how lonely and nostalgic some of these people felt, or how I perceived that they felt. Most people would enter the shop alone and drive away alone, not realizing that someone in the same situation had come and gone just an hour before them. With most of these people I only spoke with for twenty minutes, not sure where they spend the rest of their day, only conscious of how they spent a brief part of it, in a pottery shop talking to me. This project also made me realize everything anthropology can be applied to. I examined the relationship of the customers at the Pottery Place with art, religion and nostalgia, but there is so much more that can be observed and discussed. It was interesting to take the individual observations I made and combine them with others to create generalizations about people. In some ways it felt as if I was simply trying to organize data, in a more scientific way, but I also understood that when these stories are combined it creates a greater picture of what this older group of people is going through collectively, and how similar many of them are.

### Works Cited

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